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SUBJECT: HAITI: RUMORS ABOUND REGARDING ARISTIDE'S POSSIBLE
MOVE TO VENEZUELA

REF: PORT-AU-PRINCE 1364

Classified By: Amb. Janet A. Sanderson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary: Rumors of former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's possible move from South Africa to Venezuela are swirling through Port-au-Prince following Aristide's meeting with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez in South Africa on September 3 and the announcement September 20 that South African President Thabo Mbeki would resign. Members of Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas (FL) party assume that Aristide would be under fewer restrictions in Venezuela and therefore more free to involve himself in Haiti's internal affairs. Some Lavalas insiders privately fear that Aristide's more active intervention in Haitian politics could further divide their party -- even as they concede that no one in the party can openly oppose Aristide because of the support he still enjoys among the party base. On one side of this fault line are current and former party officials and others who distrust Aristide, have a critical view of his two terms in office, and who want to forge a disciplined national organization with a leadership elected by and accountable to the party in Haiti rather than to the ex-President. On the other side lie activists linked to popular organizations who hope to harness Aristide's greater proximity to Haiti to revive grassroots militancy. End summary.

RUMORS OF ARISTIDE'S MOVE TO VENEZUELA PERSIST

2. (C) While several Embassy contacts have relayed to us rumors that Aristide is planning to visit or even move to Venezuela, we have no firsthand accounts of discussions between Aristide and Chavez on the subject. Local press reports quoted a statement attributed to the Venezuelan presidency as confirming that the September 3 meeting took place and highlighting Chavez' support for Aristide in 2004. Lavalas Deputy Sorel Francois (protect) told Poloff on September 19 that Chavez had invited Aristide to visit Venezuela in the coming months; Francois claimed secondhand access to the information through sources he declined to identify. In a September 20 meeting with the Ambassador, President Rene Preval made reference to these rumors, telling the Ambassador that he did not want Aristide "anywhere in the hemisphere." Subsequent to that, he remarked that he is concerned that Aristide will accept the Chavez offer but deflected any discussion of whether Preval himself was prepared to raise the matter with Chavez.

¶3. (C) Lavalas Deputy Jonas Coffy (protect), in an October 1 meeting with Poloff, claimed to be "certain" that Aristide would move to Venezuela but said he had no firsthand confirmation. He further asserted that certain FL-linked grassroots organization leaders, although not the organizations in the "Cellule de Reflection" (see paras. 7-8), were planning marches and protests after Aristide arrived in Venezuela. On the other hand, well-connected former Lavalas Deputy Franky Exius (sometimes spelled "Exeus") told DepPolCouns on September 24 that Aristide is comfortable in South Africa and expects him to remain there for the foreseeable future.

ONE FACTION TRIES TO LOOSEN ARISTIDE'S GRIP ON LAVALAS

¶4. (C) Paradoxically, more active intervention by the head of Fanmi Lavalas in Haitian politics could have a destabilizing effect on his already divided party. Some influential Lavalas personalities question the legitimacy of the party's current Executive Committee, which failed to secure party-wide agreement on the party's position in negotiations with Preval on the composition of the Prime Minister's new government or its strategy as the next Senatorial elections approach.

¶5. (C) The most prominent FL Deputies have aligned themselves behind former President of the Chamber of Deputies Yves Cristalin, who did not favor Lavalas' participation in the new government and who is decidedly opposed to Aristide's return to Haitian politics. Cristalin told Poloff on

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September 26 that Aristide had made a number of mistakes during his last years in power. Despite his disagreements with Aristide, Cristalin said he feels compelled to keep his opposition to Aristide's return private due to the considerable support for the former President among many segments of the population. Deputy Coffy echoed these sentiments in his October 1 meeting with Poloff, noting that he shared Cristalin's belief that the Executive Committee appointed by Aristide was illegitimate. Like Cristalin, he made an impassioned plea for U.S. assistance so that factions of the party willing to renounce violent demonstrations and forego illicit financing would prevail against other factions of the party.

RECONCILIATION EFFORTS SO FAR UNSUCCESSFUL

¶6. (C) Efforts to reconcile dueling factions within the party have thus far been unsuccessful. Deputy Coffy told Poloff that Lavalas representatives from Haiti's ten departments would convene on October 9 to attempt to resolve their differences and agree on a common strategy for the upcoming elections. He added that he expected the meeting to produce a coordinating committee to manage Lavalas affairs, including the selection of senatorial candidates, regardless of whether all factions of the party were represented at the meeting. He said that an ad hoc "facilitation committee," consisting of himself and MP Pierre Jerome Valcine, Lavalas Senators Rudy Herivaux and Yvon Buissereth, Annette "So Anne" Auguste, and representatives of Lavalas "popular organizations" had been formed to mend the party's divisions but has yet to make significant progress. (Note: A previous reconciliation meeting, planned for September 26 by Yves Cristalin was cancelled for reasons that remain unclear. End note.)

SOME FACTIONS MAY SEE SURGE IN SUPPORT

¶7. (C) Although many elected Lavalas officials would likely be sidelined if Aristide takes a more active role in Haitian politics, other wings of the party stand to benefit greatly. Maryse Narcisse, for example, member of the contested Executive Committee and a claimant to the title of

spokeswoman of Aristide, remains prominent in the party for her activism for the Aristide Foundation for Democracy. She was a vocal critic of Coffy and of Senator Rudy Herivaux when they each claimed the party's support during negotiations with Preval over the composition of the new government. In addition, a group of representatives of Lavalas popular organizations called the "Reflection Cell of the Lavalas Popular Base," which organizes demonstrations and events commemorating Aristide's birthday and other significant occasions, would presumably be well situated to benefit if Aristide's profile grows.

PREVAL REPORTEDLY TRYING TO CO-OPT LAVALAS GROUPS

18. (C) Embassy sources tell us that President Preval is also actively working to co-opt popular groups affiliated with Lavalas to shore up his support. Deputy Sorel Francois told Poloff on September 19 that Preval met "at least weekly" with the leaders of the "Reflection Cell," including Jean-Marie Samdy, at the National Palace and that Preval had promised the group HTG 58 million (approximately USD 1.5 million) in funds from the PetroCaribe account to distribute to parents in poor neighborhoods for the beginning of the school year in early October. Coffy provided a more plausible account of the agreement, saying that the Education Ministry had agreed to task Lavalas-affiliated "popular organizations" to identify needy families in poor neighborhoods, and that the Ministry would then pay their school fees directly to the school concerned. Coffy put the amount committed under the program at HTG 40 million (USD 1 million) in greater Port-au-Prince and HTG 430 million (USD 10.8 million) country-wide. We have been unable to confirm either report, although the Haitian government did eventually announce over USD 197 million in emergency spending from PetroCaribe funds under the recently promulgated State of Emergency law (reftel). Coffy, for his part, claims to have the popular

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organizations' support in his battle with other factions of the party.

COMMENT: LAVALAS ADRIFT WITHOUT ARISTIDE

19. (C) Although Aristide is nominally the "National Representative" of Fanmi Lavalas, the party has essentially been leaderless since Aristide left Haiti in 2004, and any attempt to reassert control over Lavalas would be fiercely opposed (albeit privately) by one or another group within the party. From South Africa, Aristide has been either unable or unwilling to resolve disputes within his party or mobilize popular support for Lavalas. In his absence, Lavalas has become a loose collection of Deputies and Senators elected under the party's banner, a few respected Lavalas luminaries, and a handful of grassroots organizations associated with Aristide in the popular imagination. Many Lavalas leaders here believe that Aristide's insecure status in South Africa has prevented him from speaking out and involving himself in Haitian politics from afar; they reason that he would not face similar restrictions if he were to move to Venezuela.

10. (C) We judge that our sources' "assurances" that Aristide's move to Venezuela is imminent are based not on confirmed knowledge but rather a desire to mobilize international support behind their faction of Lavalas. Although the effects of Aristide's possible return to prominence are difficult to predict, it would certainly shake up his divided and moribund party. Factions in the party have their reasons for opposing or supporting a greater political role for Aristide in Haiti and in the party. On one side of the divide are elected officials and former government officials who want to unify feuding groups into a disciplined party organization and have the leadership elected by and accountable to the party in Haiti rather than to Aristide. These individuals resent Aristide's

interventions in party matters from afar, and are critical of Aristide's conduct during his two terms in office. On the other side lie leaders linked to popular organizations who hope that Aristide's greater proximity will help them revive grassroots militancy, which would then propel them to positions of prominence.

SANDERSON